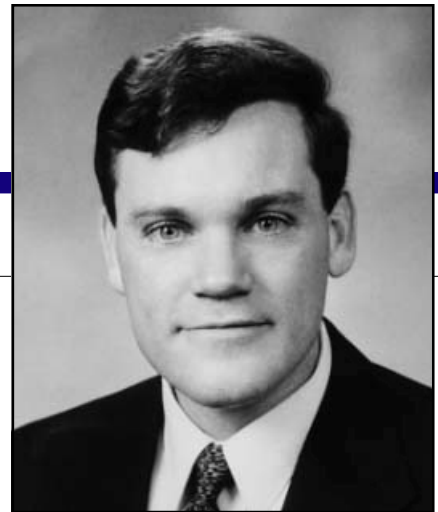


Representative Brad Benson

6th District



The 1998 Session Report

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Dear neighbors,

Government can live within its means. We proved it during the 1998 session, by adopting a supplemental budget that holds the line on spending, while preserving a \$799 million surplus. We held taxes down despite concerted efforts to increase them. Instead of searching for ways to raise and spend more money, we reconsidered our priorities. We used the dollars already provided by you and other taxpayers to address emerging needs, including education, transportation and salmon restoration.

I want to make sure the government in Olympia hears your voice and listens to your concerns. This newsletter outlines the key legislative accomplishments of the session. Please take a moment to read it. If you have questions or comments, don't hesitate to contact me. I have reopened my district office in Spokane, and you can reach me with a local call, or visit in person. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Brad Benson".

Brad Benson
State Representative

- Education
- Transportation
- Protecting families

EDUCATION

Statewide test scores released last fall showed that half of the students in our elementary schools cannot read at the basic level needed to understand their lessons. In response, we adopted a bill to improve reading skills in the early grades. We created an education grant that school districts and teachers can access if they wish to improve their skills in phonics-based reading instruction. Statistics and reputable scientific research show a direct relationship between phonics instruction and reading improvement.

The program is entirely voluntary. This year, the Legislature provided \$9 million for teachers who would like to purchase learning materials or receive training in research-based, scientifically proven instructional methods. Teachers who receive this training will do so by choice. Each teacher decides whether to incorporate this information and training in their classroom. Another \$8 million was made available for teacher and volunteer training in establishing reading tutor programs, to help children that are behind.

We continued to fully fund basic education in 1998. The 1997-99 state budget provides \$8.9 billion for K-12 public schools — an increase of \$570 million or 6.9 percent over the previous biennium. We included \$362 million in policy enhancements for the following areas:

- Salary and benefit increases for both certificated and classified staff
- Reading improvement grants
- Teacher training in reading strategies and other academic areas
- Funds to each teacher for additional classroom instructional materials
- School technology
- Levy equalization
- School construction

DID YOU KNOW?

It's rarely reported but true – most of the time, legislators from different parties cooperate and work together.

The vast majority of bills passed each year receive unanimous or near unanimous support. This year in the Legislature, we passed 381 bills, and 318 of them (83 percent) received 90 or more votes from the House's 98 members.

TRANSPORTATION

It is clear that 6th District residents do not support a gas tax increase. A recent local election showed widespread opposition. This sentiment has been echoed across the state, which is why the Legislature refused to consider the gas tax increase proposed by the governor.

Instead, we passed a transportation funding plan that will be on the ballot this fall. The plan would cut car-tab fees by roughly \$30 per vehicle, while directing approximately \$2.4 billion to transportation projects throughout the state.

Funding for the plan would come from a transfer of motor vehicle excise tax (MVET) revenue from the general fund to the transportation budget. Surplus revenues in the general fund would compensate for the transfer.

Specific projects the plan would pay for include improvements to SR 395, one of Washington's most dangerous roads; and a series of improvements to I-90 in Spokane County, as well as funding to incorporate the north/south corridor with a beltway.

DID YOU KNOW?

Class sizes in our schools are determined by your local school district. The state budget fully funds basic education in our schools. The formula used to allocate state money to each district is based upon the following ratios:

State class-size ratios

Grades K-3: 18 students per class
Grades 4-12: 22 students per class

If class sizes in your schools are higher than the numbers you see above, it's because your school district chose to increase them. When you hear concerns raised about class sizes in your local schools, remember that your school boards determine class size and teacher-student ratios in your schools. Any differences in class size between the state ratios and those found in local schools are the result of choices and decisions made in each local district.

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PROTECTING FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

This year, the Legislature increased penalties for domestic violence, and recognized that drug abuse can contribute to the cycle of violence that can be passed from parent to child. We know that drug use in families can increase the risk of violence and abuse. Medical evidence suggests that drug-affected babies are more likely to have medical, social and psychological problems. Young people who become involved with drugs and alcohol risk their future, and are more likely to become involved with gangs and crime.

Defense of marriage

We passed a bill this year to clearly define marriage as a union between a man and a woman, giving legislative authority to principles of existing case law. The bill was vetoed by the governor, but the veto was overridden by two-thirds majority votes in the House and Senate.

Getting tough on teen drinking

I sponsored legislation (HB 1117) that makes minors and consumption of liquor by minors a gross misdemeanor. Providing alcohol to minors could result in a fine of up to \$5,000, and \$10,000 for second and subsequent convictions. The governor has signed this bill, which I believe will make a difference for young people.

We passed a number of bills this year designed to protect families. Here are the highlights:

- **SB 6238** — Adds drug use to the list of risk factors when determining if child abuse or neglect is present in the home.
- **HB 2556** — Establishes testing requirements when doctors believe an infant is drug-affected. If tests reveal the possibility of drug use, the Department of Social and Health Services must be notified, and the parent must be offered chemical dependency treatment. In extreme cases, where a mother gives birth to a second or third drug-affected infant, DSHS may seek a court order to take the children into custody.
- **HB 1746** — Makes possession of tobacco by a minor a civil infraction. For the first time, law enforcement officers can do something when minors are using tobacco products.
- **SB 6565** — Prohibits insurance companies from denying or canceling a policy or charging a higher rate on the basis that the insured is a victim of domestic abuse. The bill also provides protection against property loss for innocent co-insureds who are victims of domestic abuse.
- **HB 1297** — Adds murders committed while violating a restraining or no-contact order to the list of circumstances that qualify for aggravated first-degree murder.
- **HB 2598** — Establishes a permanent tax exemption for property used by nonprofit organizations as emergency housing for domestic violence victims and low-income persons.

STATUS REPORT: WELFARE REFORM

We passed several bills this year to further transform our welfare system — an effort that has been ongoing throughout this biennium. The results of this work are beginning to show. We have seen a reduction in welfare caseloads. The number of welfare recipients in Washington has dropped substantially:

Welfare caseload reduction

November 1996

Single-parent families
82,574

Two-parent families
12,398

November 1997

Single-parent families
75,743

Two-parent families
8,234

STATUS REPORT: JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM

The comprehensive juvenile justice reforms passed by the Legislature during this biennium take effect on July 1, 1998. This will be our first opportunity to measure the results of these reforms, which include the following elements:

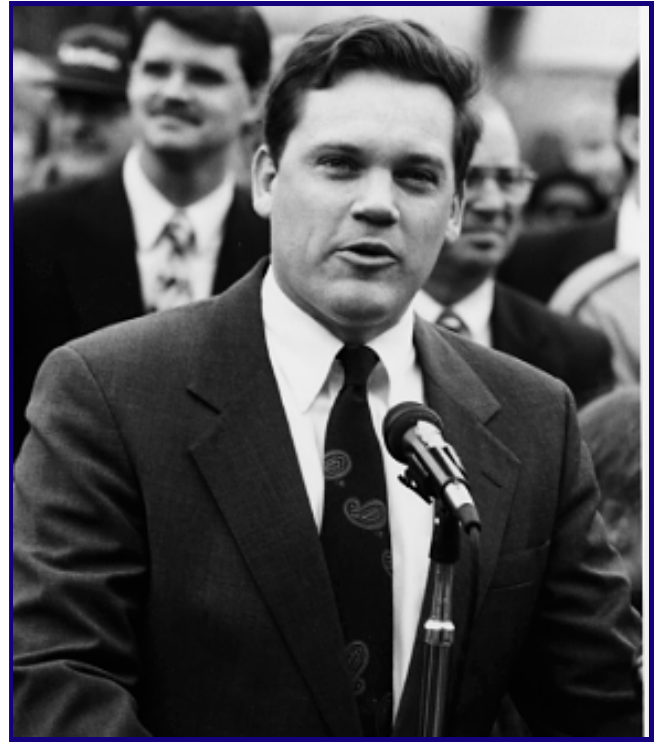
- **Tougher sentencing standards**
- **Sentencing alternatives, including boot camps**
- **Mandatory parental involvement in juvenile court cases**
- **Tougher standards on sealing juvenile records**

GETTING TOUGH ON DRUNK DRIVERS

This year saw passage of a comprehensive crackdown on drunk driving. We added teeth to a historically lenient system in an attempt to avert further tragedies. In 1996, 331 people died on state roads in alcohol-related accidents, and another 10,284 were injured.

The legislation we passed strengthens the system in the following ways:

- Reduces the legal blood-alcohol limit from .10 to .08;
- Allows police to impound vehicles at drivers' expense if they are driving with a suspended or revoked license, and increases the length of impoundment if the driver has a history of drunk driving;
- Subjects first-time DUI offenders to 15 days of electronic home monitoring, including breathalyzer testing and restrictions on alcohol consumption;
- Increases the amount of time a DUI conviction remains on an offender's record from five years to seven years;
- Stipulates that persons convicted of vehicular homicide will receive the standard sentence plus two more years for every prior DUI conviction;
- Revises eligibility standards for deferred prosecution on DUI convictions from once every five years to once in a lifetime;
- Requires repeat DUI offenders, or first-time offenders with a blood-alcohol level of .15 or greater, to equip their cars with ignition interlock devices;
- Imposes a 90-day license suspension on a driver's first DUI conviction; and
- Revokes an offender's license for seven years after a third DUI conviction.



Rep. Benson speaks at a citizens' rally at the Capitol



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